11-1973

Correspondence Between Madeleine Traynor and Ed Cony Regarding J.R. Wiggins, "The Law of Credibility," 1973 November 13 - 1973 November 16

Madeleine Traynor

Ed Pony
The Wall Street Journal

x 94704

16 November 1973

Mr. Ed Cony
Vice President and Executive Editor
The Wall Street Journal
22 Cortlandt Street
New York, N.Y.10007

Dear Mr. Cony:

It was indeed a pleasure for Roger and me also to meet you last Monday evening.

As an incurable reader, I am indebted to you for sending on the J.R. Wiggins piece. Such writing commands a premium for its honesty and experience. It should impel many a reader to guard against becoming either caviling critic or common scold of an institution that gives us our daily intelligence in sometimes marvellous ways.

Those three wholesome pages, however, rush to what may be a less than robust conclusion. Can we be sure that Great Regulator, even gusseted in capital style, is the one and only abstract to match the monster triangle of government, public, and media? Try moving Great Regulator all the way back to its kindred title, The Law of Credibility. A reader not good at solving problems with magic words might have as much trouble with that title as I do with the commanding motto of my university at Berkeley: Fiat Lux.

Lux, si. Fiat, non.

Cordially yours,

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DOW JONES & COMPANY, INC.
Publishers
22 CORTLANDT STREET - NEW YORK, N. Y. 10007

ED CONY
VICE PRESIDENT
AND EXECUTIVE EDITOR

November 13, 1973

Mrs. Roger J. Traynor
2643 Piedmont Avenue
Berkeley, California 94704

Dear Mrs. Traynor:

Here is the article by J. R. Wiggins that I mentioned to you and your husband. You'll notice it fits nicely within the three-page limitation you told me about--the one the Judge used to impose on various youthful advocates.

I send it to you, rather than to your husband, to make sure you have an opportunity to read it, too. Mr. Wiggins doesn't take an encouraging view about press councils, but it might be you both could find merit in the major thrust of his piece.

I very much enjoyed talking with you and Judge Traynor last night. Please give him my best regards.

Cordially,

Ed Cony

EC/az
encl.

The Bulletin
of the American Society of Newspaper Editors • October 1973

The law of credibility

"Who will watch the watchman?" "Who will censor the censor?" "Who will police the press?"

These questions agitate the minds of some serious persons as they see the press increase in power and influence. They take alarm at its lapses and licentiousness. They contemplate various councils of private persons and governmental agencies and watch the horizons for novel means of keeping the press "responsible."

The founding fathers, of course, were confident that the people would provide the only safe check on newspapers. It must be admitted, however, that time has diminished one of the self-correcting forces on which they counted—competition. The rise of monopoly in the news-gathering and disseminating world has diminished the power of competition.

Citizens, however, need not be dismayed. There remains a powerful and persistent restraint and check upon the newspaper that is unaltered and undiminished. It is odd how little it is noted in its operations. It performs as a Great Regulator of the press. It is a self-righting, self-balancing, self-adjusting mechanism from the impact of which no newspaper —and perhaps no publishing or news enterprise—can escape.

By J. R. Wiggins

With every publication there is created with Volume I and Number 1, its credibility bank account. The newspaper begins to draw upon it with its first issue. By its day-to-day performance it adds to it and subtracts from it. And the final accounting is as inescapable as death and taxes.

Perhaps this check would be made more visible, apparent and self-evident if there were some outward index, indication or sign of the credibility account of each publication. This sign might take the form of a figure, in a box on the front page, indicating the status of the publication's credibility. Even without the sign, the fact of a rating exists. It exists in the mind of each reader.

Every subscriber puts his own discount rating (continued on page 13)

The law of credibility.

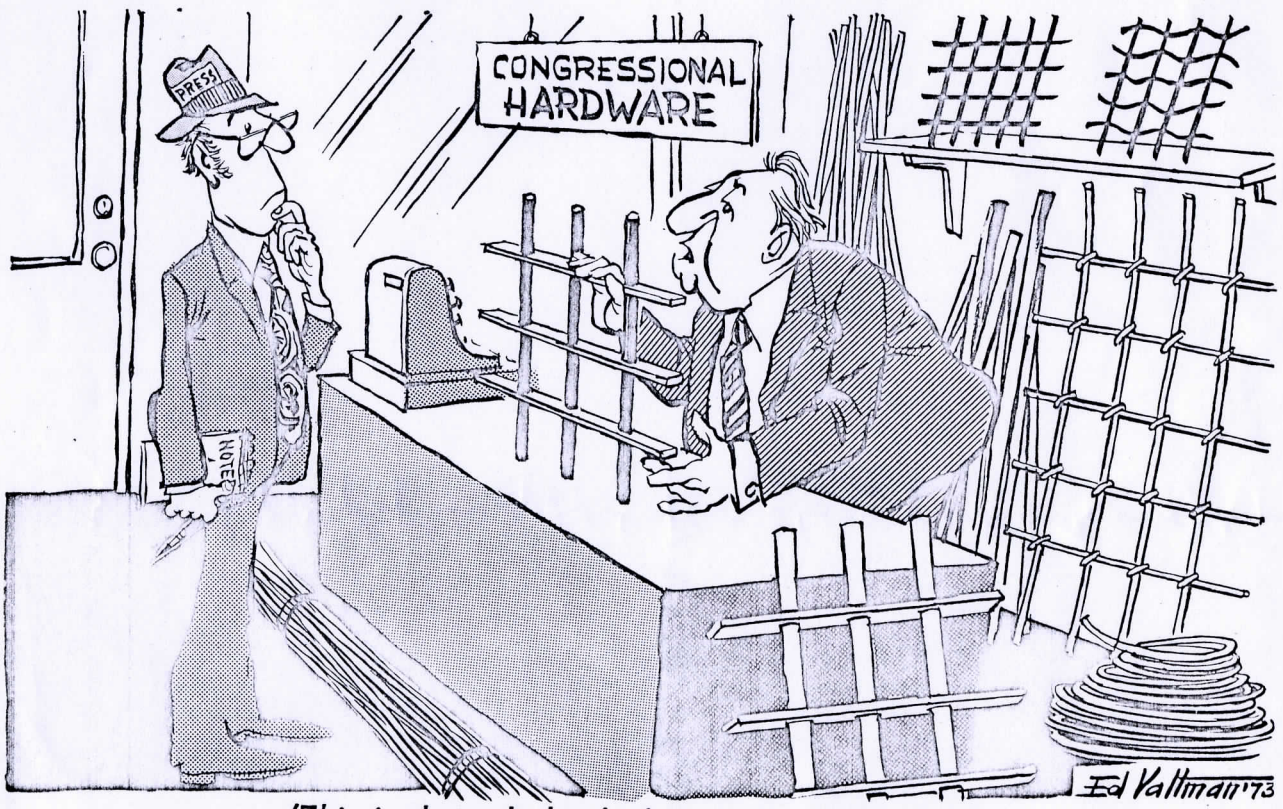
on the credibility of the publications he peruses. His mind operates like the Teller's or Cashier's window in a bank of the Jacksonian Era, with its posted rates of discount on the private bank issues of the wildcat financial institutions of the period. The reader, like the teller, has his ratings on every piece of reading he examines.

At the presentation of each piece of printed material, he does not go through an elaborate evaluation, item by item. But it operates something like this. To himself, he exclaims, as he picks up the newspaper: "This is a notorious Republican newspaper that never would say an unkind word about a Republican official or government, so I must discount every favorable report in it, on Republican things—say 65 per cent. And I must discount what it says against Democrats by 65 per cent. So this is like a 35 per cent banknote. It is only good for 35 per cent."

Obviously, some newspapers get a pretty low credibility rating by this informal discount method. Sometimes it gets so low that little in the publication carries conviction, creates belief or arouses action. The low discount on the news content carries over, like a contagium, to the advertising columns. And shortly, however large the circulation, the newspaper loses its influence, its impact and its advertising. This is the great, silent corrective of the frailties of the press.

But people cannot see it working. Like the mills of the gods, it grinds exceeding slow, but it also grinds exceeding fine. The signs of a large discount on credibility are not always dramatic. There are ordinarily stages of unbelief—not disbelief. Disbelief is sudden, dramatic, evident, visible; unbelief is more passive, subtle, inconspicuous—and deadly.

Some of the anxiety of press critics, of course, is based on confused notions of newspaper power. People see public events shaped by what appears in the newspaper and they put it down to the influence of the newspaper; it may be the influence of the news and not the influence of the newspaper at all. De Toqueville thought newspapers as such had no influence whatever, except as they distorted the news, and by the degree that they distorted. If they faithfully printed the news, accurately and honestly, it was the news and not the newspaper that was a force. Citizens are also confused by the disasters that befall politicians. They see a man stag-



'This is the only kind of protection we can offer'

gering under multiple wounds of a long public career and they assume newspapers inflicted them. Usually, the fatal wounds of public men are self-inflicted.

"But," say the critics, "can't newspapers make and unmake kings, premiers and presidents?" Sometimes. Perhaps. But of all the Warwicks in history, paper Warwicks are the most fragile. Suppose a newspaper makes a king—who will ever believe what it says of kings? Suppose it makes a president—or unmakes one—who will thereafter believe what it says of presidents—or governors or mayors or dog-catchers, in like circumstances? The newspaper cannot regularly and consistently undertake the manufacture of a chief of state without spending its own credibility bank account in the process. Nor can it un-make a chief of state without a like expenditure of its credibility account. Every partisan blow it deals the head of state is ultimately a blow at its own acceptability and credibility.

The journal of advocacy draws more heavily on its credibility bank account than the newspaper that is content to relate, to the best of its ability, with impartiality and objectivity, the news of the day. It takes the most chances. The open advertisement of its bias presents the reader with an easier handle for judgment on credibility. The reader quickly perceives that its reporters are not relators, but are essentially porters, instead of reporters. They carry causes day by day. They aspire to influence events, not to report them. They wish to shape the world, not to describe the shape of it. They wish to make history, not to write it. Their editors have the arrogance of men with closed minds who think the minds of all others are open to the imposition of their opinions. The whole institution is dedicated, not to telling what is happening in the world and what people are doing, thinking, saying and feeling about it, but to telling what ought to happen and what people ought to feel, ought to think, ought to say and ought to do about it. It is, perhaps a higher calling; but it is one that is more open to error.

There are newspapermen who think this journalism of advocacy is something new under the sun. It is,

"People see public events shaped by what appears in the newspaper and they put it down to the influence of the news and not the influence of the newspaper at all."

on the contrary, the characteristic 19th-century American journalism. The newspaper graveyard of America has buried in it hundreds of advocate journals. There are rows upon rows of Bugles, Telegraphs, Suns, Heralds, Tribunes, Journals, Intelligencers, Telegraphs, Boosters, Posts and Enterprises. All advocates. They have died, one by one, each in its own time, after lifespans largely dictated by the intensity of their advocacy. They have all succumbed to the same disease: *credibility sclerosis.* Some of them have died in good causes; some have died in bad causes. Many of them are not unwept, unhonored or unsung. But they are all, at last, unread.

They have left behind them overdrafts in the bank of credibility. Long after their account was virtually exhausted, many of them continued to sail grandly on across the journalistic seas. But while they spread their canvas to the breeze and breasted the wave, below the waterline the seams were parting, the fastenings were starting and the keel a-rot. Some drifted on for a while, mere derelicts. Some sank suddenly in some financial storm. But they all have vanished.

The demise of many was tragic—and revelatory of the cruelty of history and fate. Here was the National Intelligencer, for more than a half century a worthy journal in the national capital. Its congressional reports by Gales and Seaton never have been exceeded as objective accounts of governmental proceedings. But like most of the newspapers of its day, it was basically a journal of advocacy, too. And the generations it served knew well what administrations it was for, and which ones it was against. Like other journals of advocacy, the more its credibility rose with one group of partisans, the more it sank with another. And when the nation itself divided, it no longer possessed that universal credibility that might have made it a solvent of regional hates. It was aligned with a cause—and the nation abandoned it and its cause.

The objective, unaligned, nonpartisan newspaper largely succeeded the journal of advocacy, on the American scene. They proved more invulnerable to the erosion of their credibility than the muckrakers, partisans and advocates which preceded them; but not wholly invulnerable. Some of them, try as they might to put the face of the age before their readers, failed. They sometimes failed because the mirror they held up to life was true—but dull.

So no newspaper is immune to the Great Regulator which goes remorselessly on its self-correcting, self-adjusting, self-balancing way, holding the most powerful press up to its own inescapable judgment to its resistless credibility balance sheets.

And the newspaper that is today feared for its power and influence, hated for its partisanship and advocacy, denounced for its ruthlessness and power needs no further regulation or control. Governments and press councils, and libel laws and injunctions are feeble reeds and puny weapons. The Great Regulator ultimately will impose its mighty judgment and, if and when the newspaper's credibility is spent, it will go to the newspaper graveyard, with all its mighty, glorious and notorious predecessors. ■

Russ Wiggins, ASNE President in 1960 and former ambassador to the United Nations, was for many years editor of The Washington Post. He now resides in Maine, where he is editor and publisher of the weekly Ellsworth American.